

## **Kurdish Human Rights**

*Speech by Kerim Yildiz, Executive Director of the Kurdish Human Rights Project,  
San Francisco, 4 September 2004*

### **Summary**

#### **KHRP and the Protection and Promotion of Kurdish Human Rights**

The Kurdish Human Rights Project (KHRP) was established in 1992 of a need to further the utilisation of international human rights mechanisms to combat the appalling violations occurring in the Kurdish regions.

Since this time, KHRP has assisted victims of human rights violations in the Kurdish regions to gain access to the truth and achieve justice before internationally constituted courts, influential legal precedents have been established and governments of the Kurdish regions have been compelled to reform policy and legislation which violates international human rights standards.

Our capacity building work in the Kurdish regions transfers the skills necessary to challenge human rights violations to local lawyers and human rights activists, and recent years have seen a surge in local utilisation of the European Court of Human Rights.

Through monitoring activities, including fact-finding missions and trial observations, impartial and reliably attested information on the Kurdish regions is collected; a process of great importance where information sources are otherwise state-controlled. Monitoring has also harnessed international attention to the plight of the Kurds.

KHRP's independent research reports provide a further source of objective verification of human rights violations, as well as allowing marginal groups on the ground to have their stories represented to the international community, and acting as an important training resource.

Public awareness building has assisted in registering the frequent and often severe violations of human rights occurring in the Kurdish regions on the international political agenda, and brought the treatment of the Kurds to the attention of the world's media.

Our environmental work has achieved marked success; the campaign against the Ilisu Dam, in which KHRP was a participant, led to the abandonment of the project by its key funders. Efforts are now being focused on the Baku-Ceyhan Pipeline.

#### **The Future of Kurdish Human Rights**

It is widely attested that the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> had a devastating impact on the status accorded to human rights in decision-making around the world. Those seeking to further Kurdish human rights must respond to these events, not only by reiterating the importance of remaining committed to human rights in the 'War on Terror', but also by re-evaluating and adapting our methods to meet changed international circumstances.

Important changes have also occurred in the Kurdish regions; evidently, the US-led invasion of Iraq has highly significant implications for the future of Kurdish human rights, not only in Iraq but throughout Iran, Syria, Turkey and the Caucasus. The resurgence of the conflict in Turkey marks the end of a window for peaceful reconciliation, and we must seek to prevent the escalation of violence to its previous levels.

Turkey's pending accession to the EU is of considerable importance to the Kurds. Overall, accession would mark a positive step, but we must ensure that Kurdish human rights are adequately addressed before this process can be allowed to go ahead.

Conflict resolution is becoming an increasingly important means for generating constructive dialogue and creating space for the exchange of new ideas and perspectives. This is a route which may yield positive results for the Kurds.

The Kurdish diaspora, particularly in Europe and the USA, has dramatically changed the parameters within which Kurdish issues are conceived, and Kurdish immigrants and refugees have achieved a great deal in bringing international attention to bear on the Kurdish question. However, Kurds in the diaspora are marginalised and have little input into government decision-making, and KHRP seeks to rectify this by ensuring that Kurdish perspectives are represented at a policy level.

The relations between European governments and governments of the Kurdish regions must be addressed. European governments fail to condemn adequately human rights abuses against Kurds, and policies in areas such as investment inadvertently reinforce or sustain discrimination against Kurdish minorities.

## **Conclusion**

Much has been achieved in the struggle to realise the protection and promotion of Kurdish human rights.

However, times are now changing, and it is imperative that organisations seeking to advance Kurdish rights re-evaluate their strategies accordingly. KHRP plans to adapt in order to meet changed changing needs and take advantage of new opportunities.